

The stove hissed. John could smell the burning wood from the distance. He missed the old family mattress. His last night in this small house by the creeks was twenty-six years ago. He set the travel bag down, still in his uniform, shook the snow off his boots. A colorful, pristine fire ignited in the oven. Children running around, storming their feet on the elk hides. John saw a red hair woman leaned against the window. Her beautiful bareback turned to him. She wore no clothes. Her hair reached past her buttock. For John, an unmarried man who returned from the war, a man who paid five sterlings every night to sleep with prostitutes and felt their lustful breasts in his rude hands, that bareback erected his desire. He had seen many backs. The dark spots on his comrade's unwashed back. The hunch back of a burnt corpse. The back of a shivering young girl, age thirteen, after he pulled up his soldier pants and walked out of the tent. I had done nothing wrong, John told himself and laughed. Snow piled on his bald in the middle, peppery hair. That year he was nineteen.

He didn't remember that village girl's face but he must have felt something. He wanted to return to that tent. It was on fire. Wiping out his alcoholic sweat, Commander Lefebvre shouted and all mortified soldiers got their gears and marched toward the hills. Where their bootprints appeared, there were no survivors of any kinds. Siffer dogs were their pioneers. Loyal. Unafraid. More alert than the human. *Shoot the damn dogs*, said their commander. Most of them hesitated. *No, not the piesek*. Lieutenant Franciszek begged. John put out his cigarette, smiled at the growling, injured animals and shot them dead. Free of loud barks and food ration crisis. Five hundreds miles to the south, nobody talked to him. Another five years passed, he sat and ate dinners alone by the fire. The remaining dogs, fur the color of snow, rested their snouts on the logs, waiting for orders. There was a pup that never woke up. A month gone by. Nature reclaimed the rest. The troop marched forward, into the blizzard, into the winter dream of wonderland. Nobody had time to admire the icy snowscape where phosphorus bombs fallen from the picturesque sky. John said it was an oil painting. Nobody said a word to him.

Winter birds found their wind and would leap into the horizon. John admired the black ring around their neck. Their red beaks. Beady eyes. He raised his slingshot. Pow! One fell from

its nest. The mother returned. He picked up a pebble and did it again.

The lady's wramth and glittering sweat on her exposed neckline snapped John out of his recollection. He introduced himself as the previous owner of this house before joining the army. She invited him in before darkness came. A realm of sublimity. He had no place to stay for the night. He had no money. She asked him why he had no money. They won the war. He said he gave all to his friends. John lied through his teeth to impress the lady. She accepted his words.

She made a pot of fragrant black tea. He admired her teasing hips from behind. *This is agony*, his pants said to his sweating inner thighs. She moved and he moved, too. With his butt glued to the chair. *This is agony*, his blood pressure said to his ears. John crossed his matchstick legs, putting a cushion on top. Seen from above. Seen from below. He compared the lady like a tundra that needed more sprinkles and definitely his throbbing pocket pipe. *I walked through all that snow, crossing Finland border, bullet holes in my calf.* Saw the wild horses prancing through treeless meadow. *Now I'm in my old house*. He thought his handsomeness already reached the lady by the time she returned to the lacquered kitchen table with rabbit stew. Eyes on him.

John would stay for longer, mounting that bareback of her. Prying his keen eyes on her lips, he smiled and then told her that his time were lost, no matter what he did, turned and headed North, said goodbye to the last soldiers who drifted East, the universe quitted on him like a bastard.

Those whores in Auburn never listened to his stories. John lost the sight of them as soon as the service paid plus extra fee for double handiwork. After awhile, he made them listen with his gun resting near their glabella. None would refuse the service because he paid triple, sometimes more. He was not a mad man. He enjoyed being a broke soldier after countless trips to the brothels.

This lady was the first and only one that listened as if his stories casted a spell on her yearning heart. As if she had never left the house, his old house, to see the world. As she settled on the velvet chaise lounge, her red hair flowed like long grass of prairie. Like an oil painting. Her hand placed on her hip. *Go on*, she urged him to tell more stories. Her face blurred out in his

burning vision. No, it must be his feverish body burning with passion. Yes, a fever. John could use an illness to prolong his stay. They would fall in love. He would give her beautiful, obedient children with their mother's dewy eyes and their father's strong body. Ten of them. Twenty of them until her withering womb had nothing to offer to his urgent needs. Then, he would find another younger version of her. Chained. Unpolluted. Artless. But a little more expressive.

Go on, she drowned him in her enigma, which started to feel like ice breaking beneath his bootless feet. Go on, John. Where is the rest of your story? Her sweet voice of a hummingbird punctured his skull. He could smell the smoke from her night gown and wondered where the citrus scent had gone. Hot air from the furnace insulated the interior nicely, shielding his house from a cold snap outside. Wind changed its course, slamming through the windows covered in spiderwebs and dead bugs. Nobody knew any difference between rancid smell of a drowned body and a burnt corpse. How would you know, John? How could you tell them apart because when you woke up, it was still night?

Huh? Moisture trapped in his expanding lungs as he wished the lady would speak less and listen more. Heavy and hot air plunged down his dry swollen throat. He wanted to scratch, to kill the crawling hookworms that wiggled in his esophagus. John continued to eat the rabbit stew that tasted like yellowing grass as if his mind wanted him to enjoy the taste of the stomach, the spleen, the heart, and even eyeballs. He went for floating pieces of liver, pulling the rabbit intestine all the way from his stomach. He could taste the sea water and its starlight.

The lady and her waves of hair burnt into his mind, extinguishing the shimmering stars that walked across the purple-ish horizon with a dash of pink cloud. Her marked scent spread their wings and flew up through the chimney-hole. His eyes followed in admiration. She rose from her seat, smiling at him. Fifty yard away from the garden, a red-beaked bird with black ring on its neck flew through the brick wall and returned to its nest placed on top of the grandfather clock. John had fixed it before he joined the army. It stopped working the day he left and working again the afternoon he returned from barren land.

He wished the slingshot were here to kill that lousy creature one more time.

When I tossed a greenade into the camp fire, it exploded, frightened the dogs, he proudly unfolded the horrible things he did to the villagers days before their liberation. He wanted to impress her once more, from one story to the next.

From the painings mounted on the dilapitate wall, ghostly shadows of dogs, fur white as fresh snow, began to move. Their nostrils followed his familiar scent. One by one, each leaped out of the canvas and surrounded him, wagging their tails, patiently waiting for orders. Their eyes glowed in the pale moonlight.

*Come here, boys.* He thought of feeding the dogs his *gulasz z królika*.

You should eat it. The dogs can wait, said the lady in her green ball gown. Ribbons on her fine hair fluttered like luna moths launching themselves at the oil lamp infront of John. He hated the way her hair turned into a grassy nest as she walked over. Frigid air escaped her mouth as she blew out the candle. Her gem-like day and night eyes luminous in that desolate place. John dropped the cushion and moved his chair closer for a playful sniff. He inhaled her salt skin.

In this deserted valley, he suddenly remembered the tent and that little girl's face, the wild berries scattering around her leather satchel. Her skin tasted like cranberry sauce in Summer. Her eyes still fixed on the burning figures outside. She made no sound and John hated it. He felt dwarfed, befuddled in the tent. Anger fueled his anxiety that he was humiliated by a thirteen year old's absent-mindedness. That's why he collected his gears and left, although not satisfied enough. His commander had arranged things so that by the time the war ended, what had happened to the villagers would forever be forgotten, rendering an imminence of disaster.

When the soldiers returned to their homeland, nobody recognized them. The world had forgotten about their existence. They met their oblivion like the way they brought that thing into this world. Anywhere they go, people only see silhouettes at dawn.

The lady smiled as John ran his tongue on her hairless arm, licking in excitement. Eat your stew, John, she whispered his name softly. The dogs can wait, John. He listened although it wasn't a consolation that he wanted. He still obeyed and slurped the hot broth. In her mourning gown and dark veil wrapped around the fascinator, the lady removed a mug from her sleeve,

pouring some bitter tea to serve him with the meal. At forty-five, he licked the metal taste on his fingertips like he was a child. He lost three fingers to frostbite after spending weeks digging trench. Then he lost another one after his hand greenade exploded. The widening trenches and his fingers remained in Yugai. John was here with the lady, in the unfamiliar place that he once called home. Hands over his face, I don't want to eat no more. Say it, John. Say it.

When John turned his stiff neck, eying the elevated front porch, he wanted to grab his hat and walk out. Wolf howls from the mountain peak cried out for him. Their doleful cries travelled for miles, echoing through the flowery curtains. A lamb bone hurt his gums. Each time he wanted to chastise her *gulasz z jagnięcy*, his vocal cord constricted itself. He had to chew carefully. If not, she would make him eat more fat chunk trimmed from expired meat. Fear crept in his mind when she gave him a new bowl. This time, it was three times bigger. The pantry was fully stocked with meat slabs of different kinds as she opened and showed him. He refused to look at her unnerving, dead eyes. His pants soaking wet.

The dogs wagged their tails when John tried to get up from his wooden chair. His knees hurt. Quivering lips. Fear crawled underneath his wrinkle leathery skin. Yet, he thanked her for the meal and kept his eyes down in terror. *Sure, John, anytime*. She opened the door for him.

He ignored the blizzard. Embraced the darkness. The lady saw him off into the stunning spell of violent storm. John fell asleep in a tent by the road. Bland meal kept him warm and lighthearted, not sure why. He threw the stinking blanket over himself. When he had enough sleep, morning came peacefully. Put on his worn hat, sank his boots deep into the snow, hardly found solid ground in this weather.

I'm almost home, said John, carrying a travel bag.

Around noon, the stove hissed. John could smell burning wood from the distance. The lady's bareback leaned against the window. Surrounded by candlelit walls, her red hair came to his wandering mind. Sparkling flames blinked.